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ABSTRACT

Three issues regarding general education are addressed in this paper: What does "general education" mean? Why do many faculty members and the public have little regard for general education? Can general education be established as an important part of the college curriculum? It is suggested that a concern for moral values is an important part of general education, and indifference to general education reflects society's uncertainty and confusion regarding values. It is noted that the proponents of general education have been slow to adapt to the post-World War II expansion of American colleges and universities, and they have not stated as clearly as possible the goals of general education, leaving themselves open to charges of irrelevance and mediocrity. Those who want to establish general education as an important part of the curriculum should realize that the college is an intensely political institution and should be prepared to participate in the campus political process. It is concluded that there needs to be congruence between the stated objectives of general education and the actions of the college faculty and administration. (Author/LBH)

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GENERAL EDUCATION: DOES IT HAVE A FUTURE?

Remarks prepared by
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Kansas City Regional Council for Higher Education
Rockhurst College, February 17, 1979

I. Introduction

A. During the 75 minutes scheduled for this session, I plan to discuss the three questions listed in the conference program under the title, "General Education: Does It Have A Future?" As you recall, these are the three questions:

1. What does "general education" mean?
2. Why do many faculty members and the public have little regard for general education?
3. Can we establish general education as an important part of the college curriculum?

I intend to spend rather less time on the first and second of these questions, the questions of definition and reputation, and rather more on the third one, the question of strategies.

B. Before we begin to discuss these questions, I would like to say a little bit about my experience and background, so that you will know where I am coming from this afternoon. I received both my undergraduate and graduate degrees from medium-sized, private universities with strong traditions in the liberal arts. For the greater part of my career, I have taught in a senior college which identifies itself as a liberal arts institution and which is controlled by a Protestant denomination. No doubt my remarks will be colored by these experiences. I am looking forward to hearing from these of you who teach in other types of institutions - community colleges, Roman Catholic colleges,

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state-controlled institutions. etc.

Let us turn now to question one.

II. What does "general education" mean?

A. In a few moments, I am going to go around the room, ask each of you to introduce yourself, to give us the name of your college and the department to which you belong and also to give us - in a sentence or two - a short definition of "general education", as you understand it. While you are formulating your definition, let me explain why I think it is important to begin with this question.

B. The point is basically one of communication. I have observed that members of the same college, or even of the same department, often have widely divergent views as to what general education is. If they do not define their terms, they are likely to talk right past one another. This in turn leads to misunderstanding, if not sheer incomprehension. The parties may believe that they have reached a concensus as regards the goals of general education, when in fact they have not. (At this point the audience is asked to respond. Alternative definitions of general education, or statements concerning the goals of general education, are written on the blackboard. The audience's suggestions will be supplemented, as need be, from the following list.)

C. Here are some ways in which "general education" has been conceived. This list is not exhaustive by any means.

1. the utilitarian approach: In this instance, general education education is strictly subordinated to vocational preparation. The stress falls upon developing verbal and mathematical skills which can be put to use in any occupation.

2. the life adjustment approach: Here American society is accepted

as a given and students learn how to adapt to this situation. Courses on career planning, personal finance, contemporary problems, marriage and the family, etc. reflect this approach.

3. the political approach: The goal here is preparing students to become effective citizens in a democratic society. This is a major concern of Earl J. McGrath, as expressed in his book, "General Education and the Plight of Modern Man."
4. the epistemological approach: In this instance the stress falls on learning how to think. This is the thrust, to give an example, of Daniel Bell's book, "The Reforming of General Education."
5. the philosophy of life approach: Here each student is encouraged to reflect upon the values which he brings to college and upon the teachings of distinguished authors and, using his critical reason, to create for himself a personal code of values.
6. the personal development approach: Here I have in mind the sort of thing suggested by Nevitt Sanford's book, "Where Colleges Fail." This approach is distinguished by its concern for the affective as well as the intellectual aspects of the personality and by its efforts to correlate the students' learning experiences and the stages of personality development.

D. Let me conclude this discussion of what "general education" means with three observations of my own.

1. A minimum definition of "general education" might run as follows: a program of studies which all or most of the students in the college are required to complete before graduation.
2. In my judgment, "liberal education" and "general education" are not one and the same thing. The phrase, "liberal education"

refers to a student's total experience in college, whether we are talking about formal courses, extra-curricular activities, cultural events programs, community action projects, services of worship or whatever. "General education," on the other hand, refers to only a part of the whole. Notice an implication of this point: the difference between career education and liberal education is one of degree, not of kind. Specialized and pre-professional courses can be organized in such a way that they contribute to a student's liberal education.

3. A concern for moral values is an important part of general education, perhaps the most important part. This concern cuts across several of the definitions of general education which have been given above.

III. Why do many faculty members and the public have little regard for general education?

A. This question assumes, of course, that many faculty members and large segments of the public - and I could have added, many college administrators, students and funding agencies - are in fact indifferent to, if not actively hostile towards, general education. I think that the experiences of those of us who work in general education bear out this point. In a moment I am going to ask you to give reasons why general education is so poorly regarded. While you are thinking of reasons, let me give some examples of general education's low estate.

1. students who postpone for as long as possible taking general education courses

2. faculty efforts to whittle down the college's general education requirements

3. reluctance of upper-level administrators to attend meetings on general education
4. allocation of resources to general education; poor equipment; little secretarial help; hole in the corner offices -

(At this point the audience is asked to respond. Reasons why general education is held in low esteem will be solicited. The audience's suggestions will be supplemented, as need be, from the following list.)

B. Here are some reasons why general education is so poorly regarded.
   1. If I am right, general education is particularly concerned with values. Unfortunately we are ill-prepared to deal with value questions. There are many reasons why this is so; let me mention three of them.
      a. You will agree, I suppose, that in the United States today there is a great deal of uncertainty and confusion as regards matters of value. Many traditional values have lost their authority. We find it difficult to establish the validity of one set of values as over against another and therefore to reach a concensus as regards many moral questions. College faculties share this uncertainty and confusion.
      b. The church-related college faces particular difficulties. If the college prefers one set of values as over against another, or even appears to do so, this is seen by many as a threat to "academic freedom" or an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy. Not wishing to be called "dogmatic" and "obscurantist," the college avoids or soft pedals the consideration of values.
      c. The church-related college faces another difficulty. It must

deal with the first amendment to the Constitution and with the separation of Church and state. The college wants to retain the support of the church which sponsors it; the church in turn expects to have some influence over the college's affairs. The college, on the other hand, must put some distance between the church and itself in order to avoid the charge of "sectarianism" and to qualify for government aid. Under these circumstances the teaching of values is likely to suffer.

2. General education has been slow to adapt to universal higher education. General education, as we know it today, has its roots in the period before World War II. In that era, only a small proportion of the young people who graduated from high school went on to college. Most of these students came from white, middle class, Protestant families who usually lived in small towns or in rural areas. General education, as it developed before the war, reflected the attitudes and interests of these folk. Since World War II, American higher education has expanded enormously. New groups have entered the marketplace. These include young people who are the first members of their families to attend college; the children of blue-collar workers, particularly from urban areas; and members of ethnic and racial minorities hitherto under-represented in the college population. These newcomers have brought with them their own distinctive perspectives and aspirations. I suspect that the organizers of general education programs have been slow to take these perspectives, with which they may be unfamiliar, into account.
3. College faculties have failed to come to grips with the American high school. They are unhappy with the schools, and for good

reason: many of their graduates can't read, write, spell or do their sums. What most college faculty members fail to realize, however, is that, on the whole, the patrons who support the schools and the students who attend them are generally satisfied with these institutions. The colleges' understanding of what the schools are for and the patrons' understanding of their purpose are quite different. The colleges are interested in academic achievement and intellectual development. The patrons are interested in social control, community cohesion and a little peace and quiet. Many general education programs are based up on the premise that the schools have prepared their graduates to read critically and to write well, when of course they haven't, because they have not been expected to do so. Students who are not prepared to meet the colleges' expectations are likely to perform badly; they become frustrated and so do their professors.

4. In many cases we have failed to define precisely the goals and purposes of general education, perhaps because we haven't been too sure about them ourselves. This vagueness and imprecision has worked to the disadvantage of the general education movement. It is very hard to convince the skeptic that general education is important, if one cannot describe this form of education clearly and in terms which he can understand.
5. General education is impractical and "irrelevant." We must be careful at this point, because "irrelevance" is one of those ambiguous words which may obscure more than it clarifies. By "irrelevant" I mean here the perception that general education courses are of no help in getting a job once a student has graduated from

college. We may be convinced that some of these courses, at least, are intensely relevant, but that is not the way in which many students, faculty members and parents perceive the situation.

6. General education, as perceived by certain faculty members, is superficial or second-rate; consequently it does not deserve serious or scholarly attention. In my experience, this attitude is particularly widespread among faculty members in the natural sciences and/or among those with well-developed research interests.

(break before we go into this?)

IV. Can we establish general education as an important part of the college?

A. At this point we want to consider some strategies which we might employ in winning support for general education and in maintaining the effectiveness of a general education program. I will make a few observations and then open the meeting for discussion.

1. Many faculty members refuse to admit to themselves that a college is an intensely political institution. They shrink from seeking power and influence and refuse to get involved in what they call "campus politics." It is no wonder then that few people pay much attention to their ideas. Those who want to promote the cause of general education must learn and practice the political arts of mobilizing support, negotiating with tact and skill and accomodating conflicting interests. In other words, they must be as wise as serpents and as cunning as doves.

2. The faculty should be given to understand that general education is everybody's business, not just the concern of those who are teaching in the general education program at a given time. There are various ways in which this understanding might be fostered.

For instance:

a. Faculty workshops which feature general education can be scheduled on a regular basis.

b. If there is a general education committee or something similar, the terms of office and the qualifications for membership can be arranged so that a considerable number of faculty members will sit on it at one time or another.

c. If possible, practically every member of the faculty should be expected to teach in the general education program at some point in his or her career. Of course, if this is to work, the college must have an effective program of faculty development.

d. Careful consideration should be given to the academic organization of the college. For instance, I would hesitate a long time before establishing a department or division of general education, separate from the regular departments or divisions of the college, whose members teach general education courses and nothing else.

3. Due attention should be paid to the reward system within the college. Effective teaching and high morale will be stimulated if the staff of the general education program is recognized for its efforts, both with words of praise and in tangible ways. These might include extra stipends over and above the salaries paid to faculty members of equivalent status; special funds for staff workshops and professional development; first call on the available office and classroom space; consideration in assigning slots on the class schedule, and so forth.

4. Define each objective of general education specifically and in some

detail and establish the criteria in terms of which progress toward these goals can be measured. This can have all kinds of payoffs, for both students and faculty. Most important of all, it should foster learning on the part of students. It could be of help in academic advising. It might contribute a bit to students recruiting, insofar as it helps to clarify for prospective students the mission of the college, and to the retention of students already enrolled. These kinds of specifications are extremely useful to the writers of grant proposals.

5. There must be congruence between the stated objectives of general education and the actions of the college faculty and administration, otherwise students will not take the general education program seriously. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. If, for instance, one of the objectives is clear and correct writing, and the syllabus is obscure and riddled with grammatical errors, the students will know that you really didn't mean it. The same thing goes for logical thinking and the other commonly stated goals of general education.

(The audience is asked to make its contributions.)